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ABSTRACT

The vocational agriculture supervisor should assist consumers in making better choices, provide career information for young adults, point out job change and retraining opportunities, and impart accurate facts to be used for decision making. Certain personal characteristics are necessary for success in fulfilling the expected role of the supervisor. They include a true interpretation of the field of agriculture, an understanding of the significance of the different sectors in the economy, respect of peers, entrepreneurial skills, ability to analyze current situation, ability to analyze from a long-range perspective, and inner commitment to agriculture. The supervisor's role is also influenced by the state education administrative structure and his/her niche in the larger agricultural scene within the state. Planning an information program strategy is a primary responsibility. Several techniques and activities need to be conceived before a marketing plan is developed. They are research, secure commitment and support, identify resources, maintain contacts, and monitor, assess, and adjust. (YLB)

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The Role of Supervisors of Agricultural Education in Educating Society about Agriculture

A Position Paper

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FOREWORD

Vocational agriculture has been a part of the voluntary offerings of the public schools for many years. The growth of vocational agriculture in the public schools was given its initial push by the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 and the subsequent federal acts.

As we have moved into an information age which places greater emphasis upon skills and technical knowledge, we find renewed emphasis in vocational agriculture programs.

This position paper provides an explanation of the role of the supervisor of agricultural education in educating society about agriculture. It is hoped that educational policymakers at all levels will give additional consideration to vocational agriculture programs upon their perusal of this document.

Appreciation for the development of this position paper is extended to all members of NASAE and, more specifically, to the 1986 and 1987 Executive Committee of NASAE.

Dewey W. Stewart
President, NASAE

The Role of Supervisors of Agricultural Education in Educating Society about Agriculture

Introduction

The diverse societal interpretations of the term "agriculture" present a challenge to anyone attempting to inform the general public about agriculture. The traditional view of agriculture as farming still prevails. The fact that 25 percent of the national work force are employed in an agriculture-related occupation is not commonly known, even by those who are part of that group. It is the 2 to 3 percent of the population who farm as a career who are the easiest to identify.

A second challenge is the diversity of communications media that are used to acquire information. Each information source is used to varying degrees depending upon an individual's learning style and/or access to the source. The media include: printed material, telecommunications, audiovisual contacts, and direct involvement in meetings. A person's socioeconomic status or geographic location may determine the availability of information. These two factors also impact the type of information an individual is willing to accept.

The Role of the Supervisor

What is the role of the supervisor when informing the public about agriculture? This role must be more than self-serving preservation in order to be valid and supported by others. The supervisor should assist consumers in making better choices, provide career information for young adults, point out job change and retraining opportunities, and impart accurate facts to be used for decision making.

The fact that education is primarily the states' responsibility results in many patterns of supervision. In any given state the supervisory staff may range from none to several individuals working full or part-time in agricultural education. The jurisdiction over secondary, postsecondary, and adult agricultural education also varies. These multiple definitions of responsibility result in time and priority inequities being given to agricultural education, and agriculture overall. It is no longer possible for a supervisor to personally carry out the everyday tasks of all individual projects which affect agricultural education.

The scope of agriculture defined for this purpose encompasses those sectors of the economy which employ the 25 percent of the work force in agriculture-related occupations. It includes supplies and services to the producer; food, fiber, and timber production; product processing and marketing; and plant and animal related consumer services. The employment opportunities range from unskilled to professional in an employed or self-employed setting.

Personal Characteristics of the Successful Supervisor

Certain personal characteristics are necessary for success in fulfilling the expected role of the supervisor. They include the following:

1. **A true interpretation of the field of agriculture** - It is archaic to believe that agriculture is synonymous solely with farming and ranching. A general knowledge of each of the economic sectors mentioned above is required to effectively plan for educating the public.

2. **An understanding of the significance of the different sectors in the economy** - Beyond general awareness, the supervisor must be conscious of the economic and employment significance of state, national, and international sectors.

3. **Respect of peers** - The supervisor must earn the respect of peers not only in education, but more importantly, in the agricultural community as a whole. To be successful in educating and informing society, it is imperative that the supervisor be on a first-name basis with many of the leaders who will be influential in garnering resources for these efforts. This requires that the supervisor be able to recognize the "power brokers" or "movers and shakers" in the agricultural, political, and educational communities.

4. **Entrepreneurial** - Perhaps this trait is the most difficult to exhibit. The bureaucratic, public service atmosphere in which supervisors work tends to limit risk taking and innovation beyond the accepted norm. Supervisors must be willing to "put their necks on the block" at times in order to sufficiently stimulate particular actions.

5. **Ability to analyze current situations** - When the supervisor decides to "walk on the edge," it requires a thorough analysis of the proposed action. One of the most difficult things to remember is that traditional solutions may not be appropriate today. What worked in the past is not necessarily correct now. It may be necessary to "slaughter a few sacred cows."

6. **Ability to analyze from a long-range perspective** - The reduction of staff resources in many states can result in an unconscious trend to get caught up in day-to-day supervisory tasks. It is imperative that the supervisor intentionally delegate part of priority work time to long-range analysis of problems and policies.

7. **Inner commitment to agriculture** - Each of the previously mentioned traits is important only to the extent that the supervisor is truly committed to agriculture. Dedication and belief in the future of agriculture is essential to persevere in difficult situations encountered in achieving desired goals.

The role the supervisor plays in educating the public will vary from state to state, depending on the vitality of other agriculturalists' efforts to keep the public informed. In many instances, it is proper for the supervisor to fill the role of catalyst, initiator, stimulator, or coordinator of an educational endeavor. Some situations require aggressiveness while others can be approached more passively. The supervisor must serve as a role model in terms of attitude, professionalism, flexibility, open-mindedness, and integrity. All of the people involved with agriculture should be reminded of the need to educate the public about agriculture. The supervisor periodically must sensitize them to this need.

Planning Program Strategies

It is important to acknowledge that agriculture and agricultural education exist in a buyer's market. The plans and strategies developed must recognize this situation. It is essential that the supervisor be cognizant of changes in public opinion and attitude toward agriculture. When planning strategies it is easy to ignore the public's tendency to associate agriculture only with farming.

Planning an information program strategy is a primary responsibility. The supervisor should develop the strategy jointly with the appropriate persons, but at times it may be necessary to tackle the task alone. Several techniques and activities need to be conceived and a marketing plan developed. These should include:

1. **Research** - A portion of the planning process involves researching what educational efforts are currently being made by agricultural organizations. It is important to find influential people who do not have the time to gather information themselves and to provide them with factual, valid material. This not only gives the supervisor credibility, but also creates a "feeling of need" in the public.

2. **Secure commitment and support** - Implementation of planned strategies requires direct or indirect supervision and monitoring. The supervisor may be personally responsible for personnel management such as the supervision of hired and/or volunteer personnel. But, in most situations, the supervisor will not have the time to implement these day-to-day tasks. This work should be delegated to another individual. The primary role of the supervisor concerning personnel is to encourage creativity and innovation as well as to recognize achievements.

3. **Identify resources** - The supervisor can be effective in identifying resources ranging from dollars to donations needed to complete a specific task. It is also important to assume the appropriate role for managing resources. This role may be that of the primary manager or as part of a larger committee.

4. **Maintain contacts** - The practice of maintaining contacts with government agencies and professional and agricultural organizations is essential. The supervisor should have first-hand knowledge of, and acquaintance with, people in leadership positions. In order to maintain this acquaintance, each supervisor should attend meetings of the prominent agriculture and education groups. Personal acquaintances result in more effective communication when jointly planning an activity. Involvement with organizations means more than just attending annual meetings or making office visits. The supervisor should be an active member in several organizations. This includes paying dues and participating in committee activities. A council of interested persons from these organizations should be formed to coordinate public relations activities. Familiarity with a large number of people in agriculture will enable the supervisor to identify success stories which may be used in the information program.

5. **Monitor, assess, and adjust** - Any major move, such as an agriculture information program, needs continuous monitoring, assessment, and adjustment. The supervisor may be directly responsible for the evaluation of the effectiveness of everyone's efforts, or this duty may be assigned to other individuals. Quality control and maintenance of standards are important supervisory roles, particularly for the educational component of agriculture. The general public must have a positive perception of the program "product" if they are going to be receptive to the information being conveyed.

Summary

The role of vocational agriculture supervisors in educating the public about agriculture is influenced by the personal characteristics of the supervisor, the state education administrative structure, and the supervisor's niche in the larger agricultural scene within the state. It is clear that the supervisor must be an active, integral part of the process of informing society about agriculture.